

Finding Hope, Psalm 40: 1-5

- ¹ *I waited patiently for the Lord;
he inclined to me and heard my cry.*
- ² *He drew me up from the desolate pit,
out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock,
making my steps secure.*
- ³ *He put a new song in my mouth,
a song of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear,
and put their trust in the Lord.*
- ⁴ *Happy are those who make
the Lord their trust,
who do not turn to the proud,
to those who go astray after false gods.*
- ⁵ *You have multiplied, O Lord my God,
your wondrous deeds and your thoughts towards us;
none can compare with you.
Were I to proclaim and tell of them,
they would be more than can be counted.*

I've revised this sermon in response to the spread of COVID 19 and the events of this past week. I've kept some of what I had planned to say about hope and mental health. It's important and relevant for us today. But I've also modified the sermon to talk about hope in the face of the current pandemic. It is challenging, but essential to reflect on hope today.

For the last five years or so, I've been a regular volunteer at Vail Place Uptown, a clubhouse for people living with mental illness that's located in south Minneapolis. Instead of staying home alone, snacking on processed food and watching daytime TV – a person living with mental illness can come to the clubhouse and be welcomed as a valued member of a community. The clubhouse offers a safe place to sit and read the paper over coffee, 25 cents a cup, hang out with friends, participate in one of many social recreation activities, and then have a hot nutritious meal at a low price.

In addition, the clubhouse staff offers help to members in dealing with housing, employment, education, access to physical and mental health services, as well as access to whatever government programs a member might be eligible for. Vail Place seeks to be a “one stop shop” for people living with mental illness.

I hope you see that there are many ways that Vail Place seeks to serve people living with mental illness. The one that has taught me the most, indeed taught me the most about hope, is what we call the “work ordered day” meetings. We have two of these at 9:30 in the morning, one downstairs and one upstairs, and two at 1:30 in the afternoon, again one downstairs and one upstairs

The upstairs meetings deal with the administrative life of the clubhouse. Having been a pastor for more than forty plus years, I’ve done enough administration to last several lifetimes, so I attend the morning downstairs meeting, which has to do with the physical running of the clubhouse.

The meeting begins with a check-in, then members are asked if they need help, followed by asking if any members have successes they’d like to share with this group. At first this kind of threw me. In the world outside Vail, success usually means a promotion of some kind; receiving an honor, award or a prize; being a winner; maybe even getting your picture in the paper.

The kind of successes Vail Place members bring forward are more basic: my new med seems to be working, I cooked supper for myself last night, I signed up for a section 8 housing voucher, or simply I was able to sleep last night. We applaud them all.

After sharing member successes, the meeting continues with members volunteering for all the jobs around maintaining the clubhouse and providing meals. Not everybody at the meeting signs up for a job, some are prevented by their illness, at least that day, and some simply want to spend the time with friends. That’s fine; we’re glad you’re here. But some of the jobs are very simple – rolling silverware, wiping down tables, vacuuming – and there’s always help offered by staff, other members and volunteers in learning a new job.

Overtime, most members end up volunteering for some job or other. My favorite job is coordinating meal sign up. It’s a chance to learn new member’s names, make them feel more welcomed, and simply hang out with people. Many

of the members know that I have been hospitalized for major depression, and I believe that helps them feel comfortable talking with me.

I could talk a lot more about Vail Place as it's something I deeply care about, but I want to look back at this work ordered day, not in terms of mental health recovery, but what it has to teach us about hope. Emily Dickinson famously described hope as the "thing with feathers". It's an image that captures how hard it is to pin down what we mean by hope. Because of this we do best in talking about hope to stay close to what's tangible and real. For me this is Vail Place.

As I said, many of the successes that members bring to the work ordered day at Vail Place are simple and physical – a good night's sleep, a warm meal, just feeling good today. To overlook these comments as simple and ordinary is to miss much of the reality of hope. Hope dwells in our bodies at least as much as in our minds. And the truth is that rested and well fed, we feel far more hopeful than when we're hungry or had a sleepless night. The kind of hope I'm talking about is inseparable from honesty, and I believe that honesty requires saying how much hope is a bodily function.

I first wrote this on Monday thinking about hope at Vail Place. Rereading it now on Saturday, thinking about the pandemic, I find it equally true. In times like now when hope is essential, looking after ourselves physically is a way to sustain our hope.

Another way to sustain hope is always to have something to look forward to. When I was in the hospital for depression, I woke up the first day to bacon and French toast for breakfast. This gave me hope that we'd have it again, my first hope in a long time. My recovery began with bacon. Since then, I've moved on to hope for other things. Whatever it is, I find that always having something I'm looking forward to helps keep me moving forward through the day.

The volunteering to do jobs at the work ordered day make real another essential element of hope. At Vail Place, people living with mental illness aren't patients or clients, they are club members with ownership in the life of the clubhouse. The work ordered day, all the different opportunities to do something, is a way to live out this membership, not all that different from volunteering to do something here at church.

At its core, this volunteering says I'm capable, I have value, and I want to do something. All of these are statements of hope. I'm not a victim; I'm an agent. As with the member successes, the key here is not the magnitude of the job, it's the doing of something. In terms of hope, doing something, however small, can make all the difference.

Something else about the work ordered day meetings helps to pin down the truth about hope. The telling of member successes and the volunteering to do a job take place as part of a community. Sometimes we can give hope to ourselves; sometimes we borrow it from other people, especially people who know and care about us. Hope is birthed in caring communities. This is the reality of Vail Place at its best; it's also the reality of church at its best.

Like all conference clergy, I've been receiving almost daily emails from Shari Prestemon, our conference minister, who is helping us to respond wisely and faithfully to the pandemic. She concluded one of them with these words, "Let us do now what we do best as the Church. Let us care deeply for each other, invite God's peace into our hearts and communities, and lean on one another for support, wisdom, and guidance as we navigate these unfamiliar waters."

She's right that we need to care deeply about one another and to lean on each other. This is indeed us at our best. Our hope that we will get through this pandemic and flourish again on the other side is inseparable from the truth that we do not need to face this threat, or indeed any of life's dangers, alone.

When we come to the deep questions of hope and faith, how we will navigate unfamiliar waters, I turn first to the psalms. If you're a veteran of this church, this shouldn't surprise you. The psalms are usually where I go when I preach, especially the 50 or so psalms that are laments. They are real, so honest about life, especially how bad life can be sometimes, that I trust them. And you want to preach on something that you can trust.

For example, today's scripture from Psalm 40 has images of being in a horrible pit, of being stuck in miry clay. They tell us about pain; they make it real. Another example, in Psalm 69 the psalmist cries out: "Save me, O God, for the waters are come into my soul. I sink into mire where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters where the floods overflow me."

These words were written thousands of years ago. For me they speak truth about mental illness, as the worst my life has ever been was when I fell prey to the pitiless beast called depression. I'm sure that they speak to us all in one way or the other about the difficult times in life, especially today.

Because they are so honest about how bad life can be, I trust these psalms when they tell us that we do not need to stay forever in that terrible place. We hear in Psalm 3 "But thou, O Lord, art a shield for me, my Glory, and the lifter up of mine head." And we hear the psalmist saying in Psalm 40 that God brought me up out of the horrible pit, out of the miry clay, set me on a rock, and put a new song in my heart.

As honestly as they can – staying close to the realities of pit, swamp, and deep waters – the authors of these psalms tell us their stories. They hold nothing back when they tell us how bad it was. We naturally trust them. And then they tell us about how God met them in their pain, how God gave them hope, joy, and a new song for their lives, we continue to trust them. I know that I do, and I hope that you will also.

The original ending of this sermon was another Vail Place story for symmetry. But I feel an urgency to talk about something else. It's the hard place we're in now of trying to hope when so much of what we'd counted on, come to take for granted, feels at great risk. I need to say something about hope in a scary time.

I wrote earlier how claiming one's agency is essential for hope, how it makes all the difference to know that you can do something. I learned this recovering from depression, and I come back to it now in the face of the pandemic. We know that there is much that we can do, from hand washing to social distancing, to act a responsible citizens and compassionate people of faith. What we can do includes seeking justice for those, often those already on the margins, like many of the members of Vail Place, who will suffer more than most during this time. What we can do also includes staying informed by those who have the training and knowledge to tell us what to do when the unexpected becomes our new reality.

But what about times, and now may be such a time, when you feel as if you've done all you can or times when you just feel emotionally exhausted? As a person concerned about mental health, I urge you at such times to practice self-

care, respect your human limits, talk to somebody. As a minister, I offer you the rich resources of our faith, specifically the first verse of Psalm 40. In Hebrew “wait” and “hope” are the same verb, and the scholar Robert Alter translates it this way: “I urgently hoped for the Lord. He bent down toward me and heard my voice, and he brought me up from the roiling pit, from the thickest mire.”

As I said, psalms like this are honest about how hard life can be, times like today, but they never leave one in despair. They bring our despair, our deepest anxieties and concerns, to God. There’s nothing passive about “urgently hoping” to stave off despair. It’s prayer for such a time as this.

I’ve done a lot of this kind of praying over the last year - “urgent hoping” from the doctor’s office, surgery waiting room, and a hospital bedside. My praying was not logical. It wasn’t theologically coherent. But I know it was how I got through what felt beyond my ability to cope. That’s what hope does in extreme times. It gets us through, offers us a future, a time when we sing a new song sitting together again in our sanctuary. Hope brings us to God.

Bob Griggs